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SUBJECT: PDAS STEPHENS MEETS CAMBODIA'S POLITICAL AND CIVIL SOCIETY ELITE

REF: PHNOM PENH 109

**¶1.** (SBU) Summary. EAP Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Kathleen Stephens visited Cambodia January 20-24. Stephens spoke at EAP Management Conference, met with PM Hun Sen (reftel) and visited a number of USG-funded programs. She also met Interior Minister Sar Kheng, Foreign Minister Hor Namhong and various other political and civic leaders. During Stephens's meeting with Interior Minister Sar Kheng, she pressed the minister to ensure that the upcoming Cambodian elections would be transparent and urged continued cooperation on the issue of Trafficking-in-Persons (TIP). The Ambassador also used the opportunity to ask the Minister to help rectify problems with the draft anti-TIP law. The PDAS and Foreign Minister Hor Namhong shared views on North Korea and Burma. During a lively exchange among Cambodia's civil society and opposition leaders at the Ambassador's residence, Stephens heard about the shortcomings, as well as successes, of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC). At a breakfast hosted by the DCM with Cambodia's preeminent female political leaders, the PDAS heard of their efforts to lift the role of women in Cambodia. End Summary.

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Meeting with Interior Minister  
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**¶2.** (SBU) Expressing his hope that relations between the US and Cambodia would "last forever," Interior Minister Sar Kheng thanked the US for assistance in political, human rights, security, and development issues. He described Cambodia's trafficking in persons (TIP) ranking upgrade from Tier III to Tier II Watchlist as an encouraging step for which he and the Ambassador should both claim some credit. The Minister said that it was important that the US lift sanctions on military assistance to Cambodia, and expressed excitement about the upcoming visit of a US naval frigate. Preparations for April 1 local elections are coming along well, he noted, and the government expects elections to go smoothly. He was "pleased and proud" that Cambodia had not experienced the terrorism and transnational crime problems that other countries in the region had.

**¶3.** (SBU) PDAS Stephens noted that Washington sees opportunities to move ahead even more strongly in areas where we cooperate together. She emphasized that the US and other countries will be watching the local elections closely and would hope to see nonviolent elections with improvements in transparency and management. Similarly, TIP is a high-profile issue that some people use to make judgements about countries, Stephens said. Sar Kheng responded that Cambodia needed a democratic environment, multiple political parties, and elections; local elections, in particular, deepened the democratic process and culture in Cambodia. Cambodia's TIP cooperation would continue as the RGC

implemented the recently signed anti-trafficking MOU with USAID.

14. (SBU) The Ambassador encouraged the Minister to weigh in on an on-going debate between the Ministries of Women's Affairs and Justice about punishments provided for in the draft anti-TIP legislation, which some observers fear is too lenient. The Minister agreed that he "saw the problem" but noted that, for now, the Ministry of Justice was in charge of looking at punishments in all laws. (Note: Based on the current Ministry of Justice-endorsed draft of the anti-TIP law, maximum sentences for child-sex offenders would be reduced from 10 to 20 years under current law to just two to five years. In addition, the draft law allows judges to fine offenders between USD 1,000 and USD 2,500 in lieu of a prison sentence. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has been attempting to amend the draft's language to ensure more stringent sentences. End Note.)

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Meeting with Foreign Minister  
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15. (SBU) Foreign Minister Hor Namhong spoke of the improving relationship between the U.S. and Cambodia by highlighting the close cooperation on counterterrorism as well as thanking the U.S. for aid in fighting HIV and bird flu. The FM then addressed the ASEAN-U.S. enhanced partnership, hinting that Asian countries were working together in an increasingly coordinated bloc. Turning to North Korea, he reiterated Cambodia's condemnation of the missile test but asked that the U.S. show flexibility in the six-party talks. The FM told Stephens that South Korea had asked Cambodia to pass a message to the DPRK encouraging

PHNOM PENH 00000131 002 OF 002

peaceful dialogue which Cambodia had done in 2006. The FM also asked the U.S. to support Cambodia's membership in APEC.

16. (SBU) The PDAS said 2006 was a good year for bilateral relations. She emphasized that a "nuclear" North Korea is unacceptable. Raising the issue of Burma, she stated that ASEAN had a responsibility to highlight Burma's behavior. Turning to Cambodian domestic issues, the PDAS reiterated USG hopes that the upcoming commune elections would be conducted in a free and transparent manner. Concerning the ongoing problems with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, she stated that it would be embarrassing for Cambodia if the effort fell apart. The FM responded to the issue of Burma by saying that it was better to engage Burma than to contain it and asserted that ASEAN leaders were privately pushing for reform. He also asked that PDAS re-convey his invitation( first issued during their pull-aside in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in July 2006) to Secretary Rice to visit Cambodia and see Angkor Wat.

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Dinner with Civil Society and Opposition leaders  
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17. (SBU) During a dinner hosted by the Ambassador, the PDAS heard from opposition Sam Rainsy Party (SRP) MP and Party Whip Son Chhay that Cambodian democracy is regressing to a highly centralized one-party-controlled state similar to that which governed Cambodia in the 1980s. Roland Eng, Cambodia's ambassador-at-large and former Ambassador to the U.S., argued that democracy is in transition, not in decline. Suwanna Gauntlet, the country director of environmental NGO WildAid, noted her group's relationship with the government has been excellent and the Prime Minister has personally helped her aims in forest and wildlife conservation. In contrast, Margo Pickens, Country Director for the Cambodia Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Kek Galabru, president of the human rights organization LICADHO,

discussed the inhumane way victims of land disputes are being treated and described how little the RGC has done to help them. When asked by the PDAS why people still vote for the ruling party, Ly Korm, president of the Cambodian Tourism and Service Workers, mentioned that the CPP has provided stability after a long civil war. Former political prisoner and president of the Cambodian Center for Human Rights Kem Sokha thought that divisions in the opposition explained the CPP's hold on power. The PDAS also heard about the role of the younger generation in fostering development and the weakness of provincial and local governments in Cambodia.

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Breakfast with Cambodia's Female Political Leaders  
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¶8. (SBU) At breakfast hosted by the DCM, the PDAS met four of Cambodia's preeminent female political leaders. Interestingly, Mu Sochua, the opposition SRP Secretary General, described as "mentors" both Princess Norodom Marie Ranariddh, head of Cambodia's HIV/AIDS Authority, and Kim Sathavy, Cambodia's first female Supreme Court judge. She also characterized as a protg Ing Kantha Phavi, the Minister for Women's Affairs. Phavi added that as women's affairs minister she promoted passage of the domestic violence law that Sochua helped draft when she was in charge of the same ministry. Sochua displayed clear discomfort with her decision to leave the FUNCINPEC party to which Phavi and Ranariddh still belong, but she argued a certain "kinship" still bound the women together. Turning to Cambodia's justice system, Sathavy, who is not a member of any political party, admitted the court system is not credible. However, it is improving, she added, arguing that the concept of a professional judiciary is young in Cambodia. Particularly troublesome for the courts, she noted were the many land disputes that the courts had to adjudicate. Princess Ranariddh and Phavi both mentioned that they were facing problems with land that they owned.

¶9. (U) PDAS Stephens did not have the chance to clear this message.  
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